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Scottish Bird News

No 68 June 2003

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Dino-Birds - Extreme Twitching

Birds, as we know them, evolved from something – but what? Compelling fossil evidence demonstrates that birds evolved from small dinosaurs. Jason Hilton and Mike Taylor, curators of palaeontology at the Dept of Geology and Zoology at the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, introduce a fascinating and once-in-a-lifetime exhibition at the museum this summer – *Dino-Birds: feathered fossils from China*.

Where did birds come from?

The question of bird origins has been hotly debated by scientists for more than 140 years, focussing on the oldest known bird, *Archaeopteryx*, a Magpie-sized fossil from Jurassic rocks in Germany, around 147 million years old. With feathers like a bird, but the body of a small theropod (carnivorous, bipedal) dinosaur, right down to teeth, clawed fingers and a long, bony tail, it has tantalised scientists since its discovery in 1861. Unfortunately, just seven specimens are known, and this single species does not say much about how birds evolved except that they came from dinosaurs.

Now it might be easy to imagine that the flightless Rhea from South America and the huge, extinct Moa from New Zealand had dinosaur ancestors, but a Robin?! For some, this has been hard to accept. Only recently, with the discovery of a wide range of feathered dinosaurs, primitive birds and 'dino-birds', has this amazing evolutionary link been proven beyond doubt. Birds evolved from dinosaurs. Indeed, you could say that some dinosaurs are still alive today, as birds.

A Chinese treasure-house

Most of the new finds have come over the past decade from Liaoning Province in northeastern China. These exquisitely preserved fossils come from Cretaceous rocks approximately 124 million years old, laid down as fine mud on a lake floor. More than 15 species of intermediates between birds and dinosaurs, which the exhibition informally calls 'Dino-Birds', are known so far. In many cases, species are recognised from multiple specimens.

Feathered Dromaeosaur ('Fuzzy Raptor'). © The Geological Museum of China

Collectively, they show features which are exceptionally rarely fossilised, including skin, eyes, muscles, stomach contents, gizzard stones and - most importantly - a variety of different kinds of feathers and protofeathers. These fossils have narrowed the transition between theropod dinosaurs and birds so much that the link is now unquestionable, and more are being found and described every year.

Fluff the dinosaur

The exhibition considers how feathers evolved. One key discovery on display is the Dino-Bird affectionately nicknamed 'Fuzzy Raptor'. This has the body of a dinosaur, with a long, bony tail, prominent claws and even sharp teeth. However, it is covered by feathers (as illustrated in the artist's impression). Analysis of its feathers show that Fuzzy Raptor could not fly. So its feathers had some other use, probably to regulate body temperature or in display to attract a mate, or both – just as in birds today. Other Liaoning Dino-Birds show a range of feather types suggesting that, even this far back in the fossil record, different animals used feathers in very different ways.

Trees down or ground up?

Another major question is how powered flight evolved in birds. One theory is that birds evolved from tree-living, gliding animals, much as bats evolved from flying squirrel-like beasts. But theropod dinosaurs were ground-living, running bipeds, and many grabbed prey with their hands. Some believe that they evolved wings with long feathers as butterfly nets, or aerodynamic stabilisers when leaping onto prey, or – in a new theory – to flap to produce a downwards force to maintain grip when running up a steep surface, much as gamebird chicks do today.

A specimen of the dinosaur *Microraptor* with feathers on all four limbs was discovered too recently for the exhibition; it rather suggests that early experimentation into flight was more along the lines of that described by Douglas Adams - throwing yourself at the ground and missing. *Microraptor* was a glider

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Feathered Dromaeosaur ('Fuzzy Raptor'). © John Sibbick

analogous to a flying squirrel: a lifestyle never before seen in a dinosaur. We personally suspect that it evolved flight independently of the birds proper, in which the legs are never used for flight (as opposed to take-off and landing).

The early bird

As well as dinosaurs and Dino-Birds, the fossils from Liaoning include early birds proper. Some ate insects, some ate seeds and some ate fish. Already, during early Cretaceous times, we see birds evolving towards the remarkable diversity of their living descendants. In the exhibition are *Liaoxiornis* which was about the size of a Wren, and *Confuciusornis* as big as a Rook. They would have looked much like modern birds in life, though a modern birdwatcher would be startled by the clawed wings. And, although their wings and tail are far closer to modern birds than *Archaeopteryx*, they lack the full internal refinements such as complete development of the breastbone to carry the flight muscles, and completing the fusion of bones to lighten the skeleton even more.

Definitely the egg

Although not directly related to this article, we cannot resist ending by pointing out that an ancient philosophical conundrum has now been solved by palaeontologists: Which came first - the chicken or the egg? Plainly the egg. Indeed, the shelled egg was first laid not by a dinosaur but even further back in time by a more ancient reptile.

The exhibition was created by the Natural History Museum, London, in collaboration with the Geological Museum of China. For further information and special entry offer, see below. We hope to see you at Chambers Street for the ultimate twitch, although you won't need binoculars for this one!

Further reading

ANGELA MILNER. 2002. *Dino-Birds. From dinosaurs to birds.* Natural History Museum, London.

RICHARD PRUM. 2002. Why ornithologists should care about the theropod origins of birds. *Auk* 119: 1-17.

Jason Hilton (j.hilton@nms.ac.uk)
Michael Taylor (m.taylor@nms.ac.uk)

Two for one offer for SOC members

Don't miss this special offer for SOC members of 2 for 1 entry to **Dino-Birds: Feathered fossils from China**. Simply present your valid SOC membership card at the Royal Museum ticket desk and one of you will get in free.

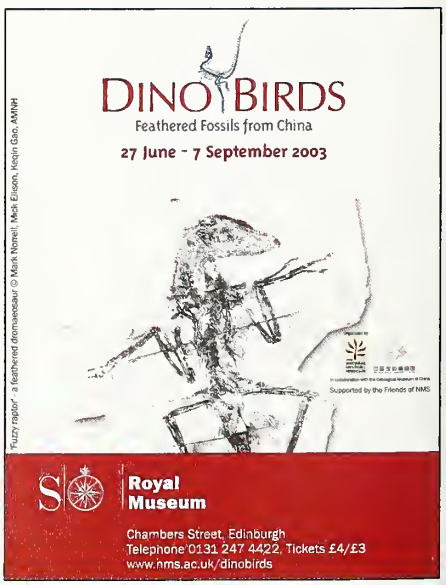
Dino-Birds Study Day

Saturday 30 August 2003, 10am–4pm at the Royal Museum, Chambers Street, Edinburgh

A study day designed to complement the Dino-Birds exhibition and appeal to all interested in birds and their ancestors, and the problems of flight.

Dr Angela Milner, curator of the exhibition and author of *Dino-Birds: From dinosaurs to birds*, will be talking about Dino-Birds themselves, while her colleague at London's Natural History Museum, Dr Paul Barrett, will talk about the other animals and plants living alongside them. Dave Martill of the University of Portsmouth will speak on "Flight in pterosaurs: thermogliders of the Cretaceous", and aviation historian Philip Jarrett will cover human flight, particularly early attempts to fly like the birds.

Tickets: £12 (£8 concessions), including refreshments (but not lunch), and free entry to the exhibition. For more information, please contact: Christine Thompson, National Museums of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JF. Tel 0131 247 4435, Fax 0131 220 4819, Typetalk 18001 0131 247 4435, e-mail c.thompson@nms.ac.uk



Scottish Bird News

No 68 June 2003

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Contributions for the next issue of *SBN* should be submitted not later than 8th August 2003 to:

SBN Editor, SOC,
Harbour Point,
Newhailes Road,
Musselburgh EH21 6SJ

Articles and photographs can be sent on disc or by e-mail (mail@the-soc.org.uk), although we do still accept typed or handwritten material.

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Here by popular demand, Duncan Watt's "Celtic Capercaillie", previously seen in its early stages at the Annual Conference last November (SBN 67: 6). More of Duncan's highly individual and imaginative work can be seen at www.spectrus.net.

NEWS & NOTICES

Conference 2003

This year's conference will take place on 31st Oct - 2nd Nov at The Balavil Sport Hotel, Newtonmore. The full programme and booking form will be available soon, but we wanted to give you a flavour of what's on offer.

The theme of the conference is **"Picturing Birds"** and reflects the importance of visual media to birdwatching. Photography, filming, painting and field-sketching all add to our enjoyment of birding, be it our own efforts or in books and magazines, paintings, TV programmes and videos. We have an impressive line-up of guest speakers, all experts in their fields, to talk to us about "Picturing Birds".

FRIDAY
Eric McCabe
- Winter in Japan

SATURDAY
John Busby
– A Personal Experience of Drawing Birds
Ian (D I M) Wallace
- The Field Sketch: Fact or Fiction?
Prof Michael Thomas
- Birds in Art over Four Millennia

SUNDAY
Tim Loseby
- A Bird Photographer's Garden
Paul Hackett
- Digiscoping
Mark Hamblin
- Classic Birds
Paul Doherty
- Birds, Video and DVD

We hope this provisional programme will tempt you to book up, and we look forward to seeing you at Newtonmore!

SOC EGM

At an Extraordinary General Meeting held on 15th March, 2003 at James Watt College, Kilwinning, Ayrshire, the following changes to the Constitution were unanimously accepted:

Delete Paragraph 3(g) and replace with:

(g) Subscriptions are due on 1st September for the following 12 months and a member whose subscription is not paid by 31st December shall cease to belong to the club.

In Paragraph 4(b), add after (6) [The council shall ...]:

(7) have the power to purchase or lease property for, inter alia, the provision and maintenance of a Scottish Centre for Ornithology.

(8) have the power to form a property-holding company, wholly owned by the club, in which

may be vested interests in property so purchased or leased.

(9) have the power to form other companies, wholly owned by the club, for operational purposes.

Subscriptions

At the EGM on 15th March, 2003 the Club's constitution was revised such that subscriptions now become due on 22nd August 2003 for the following 12 months. The subscription year now ties in with the winter programme of meetings and trips, and moves the busy renewal period in the office forward from the annual conference. Your personalised renewal letter is included with this mailing.

Management Committee and Council have also reviewed the subscription rates, which were last changed in 1997 (or 1999 for non Direct Debit payers). Taking into account the cost of the publications and other benefits that Club members receive, and considering inflation and the rates that other organisations charge (see below*), the new rates (from 1 June 2003) are as follows:

Adult	£25
Family (two adults and any children under 18 living at one address)	£35
Junior (under 18, or student under 25)	£10
Pensioner (female over 60, male over 65) or Unwaged (and claiming benefit)	£16
Pensioner Family (two over-65s living at one address)	£21
Life	£500
Life Family	£700
Library/Institution	£40

It should also be noted that there will no longer be a reduction for members paying by Direct Debit, and that new Standing Orders will no longer be accepted. The rate for overseas members will include an additional £10 over and above these rates to cover airmail postage.

ACTION NEEDED Members who pay by Direct Debit need do nothing as their subscription will be debited from their account on or near 1st Sept. Standing Order payers should amend the amount and date of their Standing Order with their own bank (the Club cannot do this on their behalf). Better still, why not take this opportunity to change to Direct Debit instead? It is regrettable that, despite several reminders, many members are still under-paying, mostly Standing Order payers who haven't revised the amount they are paying since 1997. Council have reluctantly decided that any member underpaying by more than £5 on 31st Dec 2003 will no longer receive any publications. These members will receive a further (fourth) reminder with this mailing.

The increase in the Retail Price Index (inflation) over the past six years accounts for most of the increase in rates, and Council feels that any increase above this is justified on the basis of the volume of publications alone. *Scottish Bird News* has fledged into a full-colour Club magazine of significant content, and its page length will increase with the September issue. In 2003/04, members will receive four issues of *SBN*, one 64-page issue of *Scottish Birds*, the *2001 Scottish Bird Report* and a *Raptor Round-up* covering 2000 and 2001. Management is continually looking at ways of improving the membership package. Branch Representatives have been asked to request feedback on which publications members would like to receive with their membership, with a view to making the mailings more flexible, but it is clear that this may prove difficult to implement.

*Current adult subscriptions to broadly comparable organisations are: SWT £24; RSPB £28 plus £4-5 for a local group; BTO (with *Bird Study*) £41; BirdWatch Ireland (with *Irish Birds*) £26; WWT £26.

SCO financial issues

Rapid progress is being made with the Waterston House project at Aberlady, but it is perhaps opportune to clarify some of the financial issues involved and explain the role of the SOC in funding the building. Firstly, the funds will come from several sources. These are the Property Endowment Fund (PEF) of the SOC (administered by four trustees, who are also the office bearers of the SOC), Club funds (administered by elected Council members), and external funding (co-ordinated by Bill Gardner). The PEF contains the income from the sale of 21 Regent Terrace and the use of this money is restricted to the purchase and maintenance of a Scottish Centre for Ornithology (SCO). Secondly, it is planned that Waterston House will be "owned" by a charitable company, limited by guarantee (wholly owned by the SOC), whose directors will be the elected members of SOC Council.

The current budget for the project stands at over £750,000 of which approximately 55% will come from the PEF, 10% from Club funds and 35% from external sources. The target for external funding is based on what is thought to be a reasonable estimate, based on experience gained from similar projects. There is, of course, an element of risk involved with such a large project, and Council has debated this at length. There is also the need for the project to be well advanced before external funders will even consider it; this introduces a further element of risk. Council is strongly of the opinion that for the project to succeed, and for it to take the Club forward, it is worth taking what it considers to be reasonable risks.

During the coming months, our Development Manager will be involved in a number of fund-raising activities, in parallel with moving the project through the planning stages. This will not be an easy period for the Club, but Council is fully committed to and enthusiastic about this exciting project.

New members

A warm welcome is extended to the following new members: **Ayrshire** Donald Stewart. **Borders** Heinz Giegerich. **Clyde** Scott Maxwell, Stuart Peddie, Alexander and Wilma Wilson. **Fife** Laurie Clark. **Highland** Dr John Bowler, Ronald Macdonald. **Lothian** Ms Margaret Anderson, Patrick and Patricia Brown. **South of the Border** Alan Sherlock (Stoke-on-Trent). **Overseas** Douglas Cowieson (Geneva, Switzerland).

Vacancies on Council

Members are reminded that the deadline for Council nominations is 31st July, 2003. There are two vacancies this year, but please note that the options are now widened to Hon Treasurer, Vice President or elected member. Prospective nominees may like to bear in mind that the Hon Treasurer is not responsible for day-to-day book-keeping!

New Editor for *SBN*

The Club is looking for a new editor for *SBN*. After 25 or so years working in birds and conservation, and an enjoyable year as *SBN* editor, I am having a radical career change with a move into teaching. I start my training at Moray House in the autumn and will relinquish the editorial reins after September's *SBN*.

The new editor must have a computer and be on e-mail. Otherwise, an enthusiasm for the SOC and its role in promoting and communicating birds and birding (or birdwatching, if you prefer!) in Scotland is the only requirement. The position is voluntary but an honorarium of £75 per issue is offered. Please contact HQ as soon as possible if you are interested in taking this on - it's good fun (honest, m' lud).

Mike Fraser

Henry Robb honoured

We are delighted to hear that Henry Robb, long-time SOC member, ringer and nestbox addict, has been presented with

the BTO's prestigious Jubilee Medal. This is awarded "For committed devotion to the Trust". Congratulations, Henry, on your well-deserved recognition.

Henry Robb (r) receives his medal from Derek Robertson. (Jeff Baker, BTO)

A new *Birds of Scotland*

The lead article in *SBN* 61 (March 2001) was a proposal by Club President, Ian Andrews, for a series of new avifaunal accounts, each covering a region of Scotland. A working party was set up and has made significant progress. It believes, however, that prior to the local volumes being produced, it is important to collate the enormous amount of new information accumulated since 1986 in an updated national account. We are now able to announce that, as a forerunner to the local series, the Club is in the preliminary stages of producing a major new book on the country's birds. This will be a successor to Baxter and Rintoul's *The Birds of Scotland* (1953) and Valerie Thom's *Birds in Scotland* (1986).

Birds of Scotland 3

It was decided that the new "Birds of Scotland", now informally known as *BS3*, should be a Club project involving as many people as possible. An Editorial Group has, therefore, been formed. This comprises Ian Andrews, Mike Betts, David Clugston, Ron Forrester, David Grundy, Bob McGowan, Ray Murray and Bernie Zonfrillo. "Guest authors" will be invited to write introductory chapters or accounts for species of which they have specialist knowledge. The Editorial Group will be responsible for co-ordinating the project, writing other sections and ensuring consistent standards and style. In this way we hope to produce the most authoritative volume possible.

Publication is aimed at 2007. The book is expected to be A4 or similar format and run to 700–800 pages. It is intended to be full colour and illustrated with photographs, maps and graphics. The print run will be relatively small and to keep the price down it is hoped that those involved will donate their work free of charge, with all royalties coming to the Club. This would help establish a publication fund which could later be used to assist the local avifaunas. We will, however, hopefully be able to offer contributors payment on a sliding scale ranging from reduced-price to free book(s) or a modest fee, depending on the level of individual input. Finding a sponsor may determine how generous we can be!

Proposals for contents and layout have reached an advanced stage. Templates for species accounts have been produced and some specimen texts written. We now expect fairly rapid progress towards completion of the species accounts which will form the main section of the book.

Photographs for *BS3*

One aim of the book is to include the best available photograph of every species and distinctive subspecies on the Scottish List. The photos could be close-up portraits, in habitat or, in the case of rarities, in-the-hand.

We therefore invite photographers to submit existing work for consideration and to focus their future efforts on obtaining images for this exciting project. In addition, over the next three years the annual SOC Photographic Competition will be run in conjunction with *BS3*. All photographs submitted will automatically be entered into the competition for that year and will be considered for publication. First (£30), 2nd (£15) and 3rd (£10) prizes will be awarded annually in three categories for technical, compositional and rarity qualities, as illustrated in the accompanying photos.

So now is the time to sort out your best photographs of Scottish birds. If you think you have a stunning close-up of a Blue Tit, an atmospheric picture of a Ringed Plover on its nest on a shingle beach, or the only shot of the 1965 Aberlady Bay Cream-coloured Courser, we would like to see it - and more! The Club hopes that, in addition to being the authoritative reference, *BS3* will be a unique and beautiful celebration of Scottish birds and that everyone who has ever photographed birds in Scotland will be eager to contribute to it.

For inclusion in the 2003 competition, photographs should reach the SOC (marked "BS3") by 30th September. All material will be acknowledged. The originals will be scanned and returned to you as soon as possible. All submissions must be accompanied by an application form and entrants must abide by the competition rules and guidelines. These are available on www.the-soc.org.uk or from HQ.

Should you have any photographs which you wish to be considered for the new book, but which are ineligible for the competition, or which you do not wish entered, these can be sent to Ian Andrews, the book's photographic editor, c/o HQ.

Ronald W Forrester
RForre5352@aol.com

200 Club

The winners for March and April 2003 were: **March - 1st** £30 W G Prest **2nd** £20 Mrs V McLellan **3rd** £10 Miss R Davidson. **April - 1st** £30 D Mackenzie **2nd** £20 J S Wilson **3rd** £10 Lt Cmdr Spragge.

All who rejoined by 1st June for the club's fifteenth year are warmly thanked for their continued support, which is gratefully acknowledged by Council. If you are not yet a member and would like to join now, please contact me for further information at Rosebank, Gattonside, Melrose, Roxburghshire TD6 9NH.

Daphne Peirse-Duncombe

Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference

The annual Scottish Birdwatchers' Conference, organised by the SOC Ayrshire branch and held jointly with the BTO, took place on Saturday 15th March at James Watt College in Killwinning, Ayrshire. This year's theme was "Symbiotic Alliance".

The morning dawned frosty, bright and calm, and turned into a glorious sunny and, for March, warm day. Typical! Nonetheless, the 96 delegates were treated to an excellent showcase of talent in an ideal venue. All but one of the talks was given using PowerPoint, with Kevin Waite, the Ayrshire branch "webmeister", ensuring that everything went smoothly. Displays included plans for Waterston House, BTO sales, East Ayrshire and Dumfries & Galloway Ranger Services, Fife Bird Atlas, Glasgow University Hunterian Museum, Hessilhead Wildlife Rescue Trust, Paisley University (Lesser Whitethroat research), RSPB North Ayrshire members group, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Agricultural College (Auchencruive), SOC Ayr branch (touring), SOC Clyde branch (Eider project), and SWT. Computer software of interest to birdwatchers was also available to "test drive".

The conference began with the official launch by Cathy Jamieson MSP of the superb *Birdwatching in Ayrshire and Arran*, produced by the SOC Ayrshire branch. Cathy's North-East Ayrshire constituency holds about half the sites mentioned in the book. She stressed the partnership between local organisations and cited the efforts to secure the new Muirkirk Uplands Special Protection Area as a good example. She made special mention of the hard work which had gone into the production of the booklet and congratulated those involved.

Duncan Watt introduced the first session and explained how so much of the local and national environmental agenda is led by SOC members in partnership with others. The first speaker, Stuart Housden (Director, RSPB Scotland), echoed the theme and highlighted surveys and monitoring, practical conservation work and campaigning. Something we can all do as individuals to assist the conservation of Scotland's birds is to sign up for a Breeding Bird Survey (BBS; see *SBN* 67: 5). All branches should respond to the wildlife legislation due to go to the Scottish Parliament later this year. (See www.scottish.parliament.uk). With all the work done last year by Scottish conservation organisations, the draft legislation looks promising and is to be supported, but even a letter of support is still important. Two particular threats were drawn to our attention. First, the continued problem of raptor persecution and the wish of the Scottish Gamekeepers Association to legalise culling (equals killing) of birds of prey. Second, political indifference – politicians not putting the environment at the core of policies.

From an overview we were down to earth with Mark Ruggeri of the East Ayrshire Countryside Ranger Service. This was very much a personal account of a conversion to birding from an early interest in natural history but no real knowledge of birds. For instance, Mark's first experience of shrikes was finding a larder at Aird's Moss, but it was 15 years before he discovered it was the work of a Great Grey Shrike. It took a holiday in Australia to open his eyes to the wonder of birds and he came home wondering what would be the first bird he would see! Mark is in an ideal position to educate the young generation and from this talk we know they are in good hands.

Nick Carter (BTO) introduced the next two speakers. David Noble (BTO) presented results of the BBS for Scotland. There were 300 plots in Scotland in 2000, and 2003 is the tenth year of this survey, a partnership between several organisations. By extrapolating long-term data from Scottish plots it is clear that a number of species have been increasing, especially in gardens, and this is linked to milder winters. Many upland species are doing less well, however.

Tom Byars then stunned many of us with a review of his 20-year study of Lesser Whitethroats in what was Strathclyde region. Suitable scrub habitat is very localised and the song period very short (4-14 days). There are just three core sites and all territories were characterised by dense vegetation up to 1m. Conservation issues include actual or threatened damage to these sites.

After lunch, Roger Hissett introduced two talks about the national Wetland Bird Survey (WeBS). Local dedication to this cause was demonstrated by Dave and Julie Grant, WeBS organisers for Ayrshire. Some local results were presented, peppered with comments from counters including: "Even in the foulest weather, I have to go out birdwatching"! It was demonstrated how Goldeneye have moved to coastal sites, connected with feeding at sewage outlets. BTO Research Ecologist Andy Musgrove is compiling the *Low Tide Count Atlas* which will map where birds feed on 62 estuaries around the British coast. Irvine was used as a local example. Nationally, the most numerous species in these estuaries are Dunlin and Lapwing, though the most widespread are Curlew and Redshank.

Finally, Angus Hogg introduced us to the last two speakers. Gordon Riddle somehow managed to include Kestrels in his talk on Culzean Country Park. Gordon is extremely enthusiastic about both these topics and anyone ready to doze off after the tea break could not have failed to keep attentive during this tour around Culzean. I'm sure that all the audience will be planning a trip here to see the wonderful mix of habitats close to the Robert Adams architecture of the Castle. With Gordon's persuasion, the building now hosts nestboxes for Swifts and Peregrines.

All the talks showed how individuals and organisations working together can achieve so much more than one person acting alone. The SOC, being a club composed of many diverse members and with a long history, does exactly that. Bill Gardner concluded the day with an overview of some of these partnerships, starting with the group of school boys (including George Waterston) on the Isle of May at the very beginning of the SOC, through Baxter and Rintoul and 21 Regent Terrace - which saw so many bird-related organisations under its roof at various times - to the planned implementation of George Waterston's vision of a true Scottish Centre for Ornithology.

The Ayrshire Branch is to be congratulated on providing us with a superb day, excellent talks and the opportunity to meet likeminded people. Many members played their part, but special mention must go to Duncan Watt for his vision and commitment and Henry Martin for keeping everything moving towards such a splendid result.

Mark Holling

From the Archives

Following the great interest shown in Pat Sandeman's pre-war photographs of the Isle of May in *SBN* 66, we are pleased to publish some more of his pictures. These feature some notable characters around the time of the Club's formation almost 70 years ago and who were obviously all as keen and active as any birder today.

It is again a pleasure to thank Pat for providing these historical pictures. If any other members have photos of early birding in Scotland we would be keen to see them.

Birdwatching from the roadside at Loch Shiel, May 1939.

Ian Munro and George Waterston on the summit of Braeriach, December 1938.

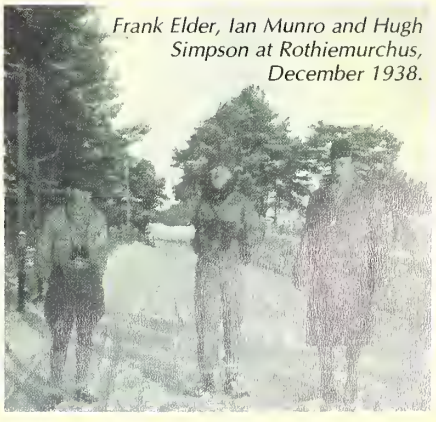
A field trip to Holy Island, April 1934.

Arriving at Salen on a tour of the north of Scotland, May 1939.

Ian (JHB) Munro and Gerry Sandeman at the end of a stay on the Isle of May (note the empties!), May 1935.

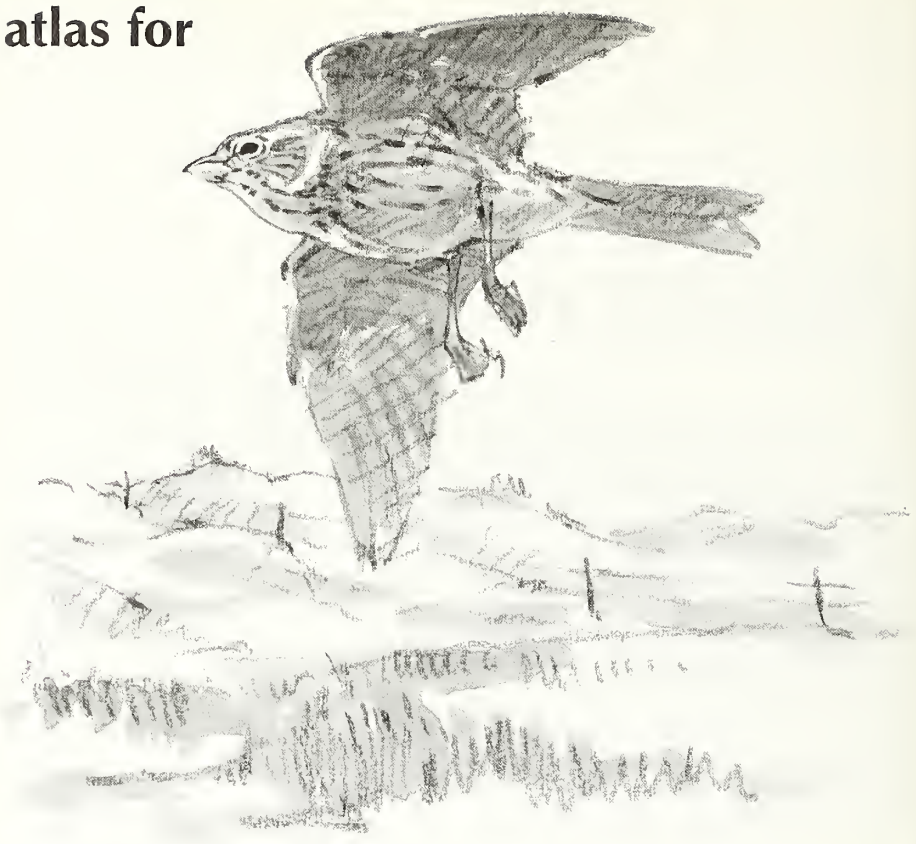
"Abominable snowmen", Aviemore, January 1939.

Frank Elder, Ian Munro and Hugh Simpson at Rothiemurchus, December 1938.



A new breeding-bird atlas for North-East Scotland

Ian Francis describes the new NE Scotland atlas and how SOC members can help in this ambitious and exciting project.



NE Scotland Atlas results have already been used to produce a map of Corn Bunting distribution for targeting RSPB farm conservation and survey projects. (John Busby)

Twenty years have passed since fieldwork began for the pioneering *Birds of North-East Scotland* atlas (Buckland, Bell and Picozzi 1990). The recording period spanned 1981-1984 and breeding evidence for all species was located in each of 395 recording units in what is now Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City. In addition, information on winter occurrence and migration was collated and analysed. This was a ground-breaking book and remains unique in its breadth and depth of coverage.

There have been many changes in the numbers and distribution of breeding birds since then. Following discussions between local ornithologists and representatives of different clubs and organisations, it was decided to attempt a new breeding-bird atlas. This began in 2002 and will span five years. The new atlas includes Moray (which has never had a breeding-bird atlas), and is being run by an informal committee of local birders under the auspices of the SOC Grampian Branch and the Moray Bird Club. The atlas will provide detailed information on breeding-bird distribution and will allow an assessment of change over 20 years for the Aberdeenshire part of the area. The recording unit is the tetrad – 2 x 2km squares on the Ordnance Survey grid. This means that in terms of the number of squares to be visited the task is enormous, but the detail and amount of information revealed makes this approach well worthwhile.

Recording breeding birds

In common with many local breeding-bird atlases, our project aims to find the 'highest' level of breeding activity of every species in every tetrad over the period of the atlas. Records will accumulate from year to year for each tetrad and from all sources so that a composite five-year picture of the breeding birds in each tetrad is produced. The results are combined to produce the atlas maps. Records will come from many sources, from individual birders "adopting" a tetrad and working it intensively, to "casual" sightings of one breeding species by one observer in a square. Specialist surveys and the results from studies of individual species will also be incorporated as much as possible. Any breeding record is potentially valuable, therefore, as it may not have been recorded by anyone else. The approach to the atlas will change over time as the maps begin to fill. In subsequent years, tetrads in "blank" areas on the maps will need to be targeted specifically. We hope that groups of birders will become interested in visiting under-recorded areas as the project proceeds.

Cards are provided for more detailed working of tetrads and for noting casual records anywhere. It is also possible to enter casual or supplementary records via the atlas web page (www.nescotlandbirdatlas.org.uk), developed with the kind help of Paul Doyle. This website will be developed in the coming years to provide information and feedback.

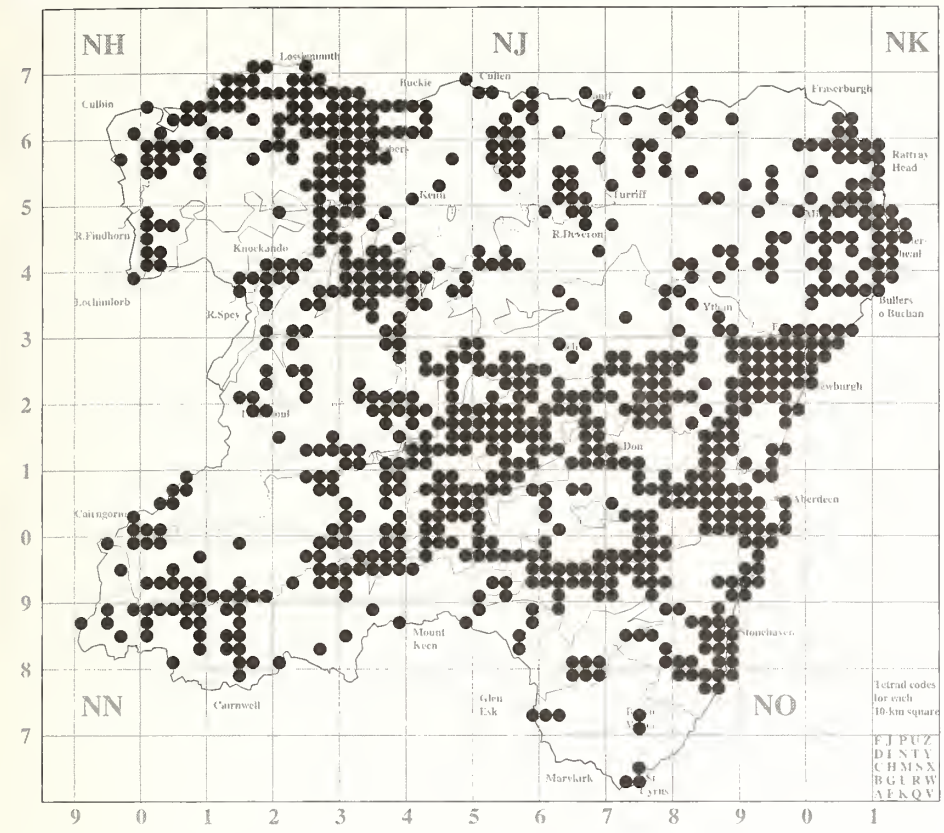
Preliminary results from 2002 pilot year

During 2002, 150 observers submitted records to the atlas, a very encouraging number. Of the 519 tetrads allocated to observers for detailed coverage, 481 were covered during the season. Numerous additional tetrads were also visited and many casual or supplementary records were submitted. This led to visits during the first year to 862 tetrads - those with at least one species recorded (Figure 1). This gives an optimistic picture, but assessing this is not easy and more sophisticated methods of showing coverage are being developed. For example, even with intensive and sustained fieldwork over five years, it is difficult to be sure that all species have been found and proved to breed in any tetrad (especially those holding a large number of species).

How then, should completeness of coverage be assessed? Some atlases have chosen an arbitrary number of hours (*eg* four in Cumbria) and aimed to ensure that all tetrads were covered to at least this level. We chose instead to use our previous atlas to estimate the number of species likely to be present in any given tetrad. In Moray, with no previous atlas, informed judgement was used. When numbers found in the new atlas exceeded 90% of this figure, we considered a tetrad to be 'covered' in terms of species found and, in future, no special effort will be made to visit that tetrad for general survey purposes. However, new records from the tetrad will be welcome for missing species or new breeding occurrences. In addition, though, to the "number of species" coverage level, there is the question of the number of species proved to breed. Again, estimates will be generated of the likely figure for each tetrad, based on previous atlas information or informed judgement.

Although analysis of the first season's data is not yet complete, we will soon be in a position to assess which tetrads are essentially "complete", except for a very few additions likely to be generated by the two circumstances described above. We considered that it was necessary to develop criteria such as these in order to encourage the adoption of new tetrads

Figure 1. North-East Scotland Breeding Bird Atlas: tetrads with any records at all in 2002 = 862.



each year so that the large number of tetrads in the recording area can be completed, rather than focusing on tetrads already well-covered just to find a few missing species.

By the end of the first season, the preliminary distribution maps are inevitably very patchy, but we produced them for all species to encourage observers to fill gaps on a species basis. The maps also provided feedback to show observers that their hard work was yielding fruit! The maps for two contrasting gamebird species are illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. The Red Grouse is beginning to show the familiar upland distribution (areas shaded are over 300m), whereas Quail shows a scattered lowland distribution. In fact, atlas fieldwork revealed records of Quail from 26 tetrads, many of which would not have been found through other birding activities. There were even two records of confirmed breeding – a nest was found near Banff and chicks were seen near Newburgh. Other atlas information has already been used for conservation purposes – for example, producing an up-to-date Corn Bunting distribution for targeting RSPB farm conservation and survey projects.

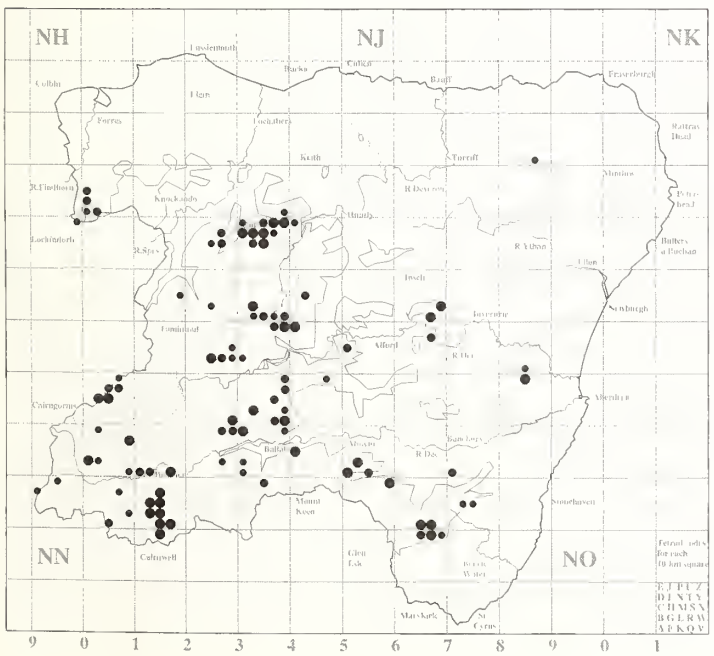
In 2003 we are encouraging coverage of new tetrads plus, in some cases, follow-up work in incomplete tetrads. The degree of coverage in 2002 indicates that the project is viable within the proposed five-year period, but it will require constant encouragement and review. Several options are being considered to boost coverage levels and we would very much welcome help from SOC members. If you live close to Aberdeenshire or Moray and could offer some time, or if you live further afield and feel you could visit for a day or a weekend, then please get in touch. We would do our best to allocate squares to you in areas you requested and, if you were sufficiently keen to be allocated a tetrad anywhere, you would be welcomed with open arms!

We will be developing the "hit-squad" approach to fill strategic gaps or cover particular species over a wider area, and for this we could use any help available. If you fancy birding in spectacular areas such as the Cairngorms, Upper Donside, the Moray moors or Aberdeenshire's splendid coastline, then this could be just the survey for you! If you would like to help, please contact me for Aberdeenshire or Martin Cook for Morayshire (01542 850296; martincook9@virgin.net).

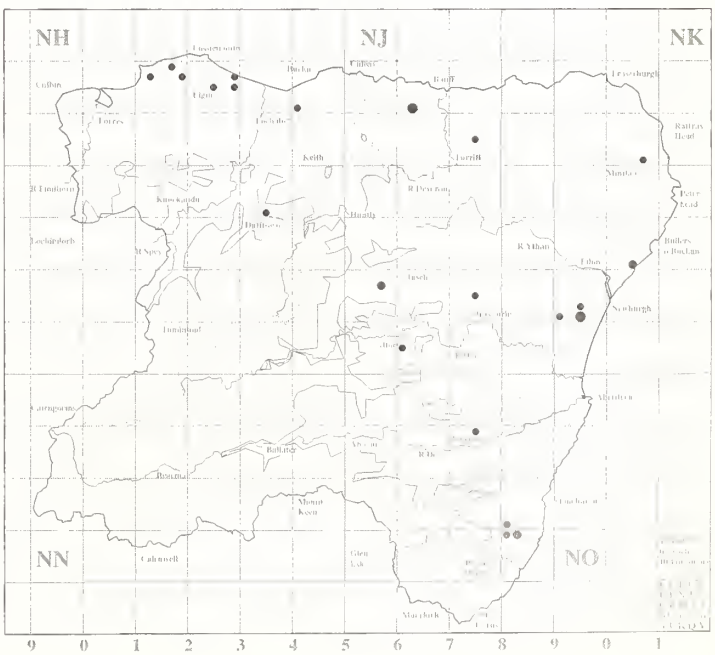
Ian Francis (ifnp@clara.co.uk) 01224 624824 daytime, 019755 62457 evenings. NE Scotland Breeding Bird Atlas, c/o 10 Albyn Terrace, Aberdeen AB10 1YP

Figures 2 & 3. North-East Scotland Breeding Bird Atlas. 2002 records for Red Grouse (left) and Quail (right).

Red Grouse



Quail



Late summer wader migration at Loch Gruinart, Islay

Loch Gruinart, a refuelling spot for migrant waders on Islay. (James Clark)

On the evening of 8th July, 2002 I was sitting in my house overlooking Loch Gruinart when I saw a flock of 300 or so waders wheeling around, catching the light of the setting sun. Such a large number of waders at this time of year was unusual. I grabbed my bins and found, to my surprise, that they were not the expected Curlew or Oystercatcher (whose post-breeding numbers had been building up), but medium-sized waders with some flashing white in the wing.

I hastily grabbed my scope and went outside. By this time the flock was flying quickly down the estuary. Despite them landing briefly, I struggled to get the scope on them and the light was against me. Size-wise they fitted Knot or Redshank, and the large flock size suggested the former. But what about the white in the wing? The flock then climbed and spread out, enabling me to count 270 receding silhouettes as they headed off high to the south. Clearly these were migrant waders on the move but, frustratingly, I hadn't clinched their identification. I pencilled them in my notebook as Knot, and summed up the sighting as "extraordinary but frustrating"!

The following evening, I was carrying out a duck count on nearby Loch Gorm when I saw a flock of 42 Redshanks on a rocky spit where I had never seen more than a handful before. The birds were very jumpy, taking off regularly, circling the loch calling excitedly and landing again, the typical skittish behaviour of birds getting ready to migrate. At 21h30 they took off, climbed high and headed off south – definite migrants. Perhaps the birds I saw yesterday had been Redshanks? Everything fitted apart from the large flock size; 15 years of WeBS counts by the RSPB at Loch Gruinart had recorded a maximum of only 140 Redshanks, but even this was exceptionally high for the estuary.

The following evening the conditions for migration were good, with clear skies and a brisk NW tail wind. So I visited the head of Loch Gruinart to see if there were any more waders on the move. Sure enough, at 21h30 a flock of 156 Redshank (an estuary record!) appeared from nowhere. They fed briefly and frantically, bathed, took off and landed a few times, before circling the estuary twice and departing high to the SSE at 21h54. The "jizz" of this departing flock was exactly the same as that of the 270 that I had seen two evenings previously, and I was now convinced that they, too, had been Redshanks in unprecedented numbers.

Visible migration

For a devotee of visible migration this was exciting stuff, especially for the west of Scotland where watching migrants actually on the move is mostly limited to the arrival and departure of geese and to seawatching. And in July to boot! I was quickly hooked and, with the help of Tristan ap Rheinallt, was able to visit the estuary on most evenings for 1-2 hours throughout the rest of the month. Unfortunately, holidays off the island, work commitments and increasingly earlier sunsets made daily coverage impossible in August and September.

Table 1 shows the numbers of migrants seen leaving the estuary during July 2002 (counts of birds "present/feeding/resting" on the estuary are not shown). There can be no doubt that these departing birds were genuine migrants. All the records relate to birds showing the behaviour described above. Whenever possible, flocks were tracked until they went out of sight, by which time they had usually spread out into a long line or skein with steady flight. Most movements occurred in the two hours before dusk on evenings with a brisk tail wind (N or NW) and clear skies. This ties in with David Lack's radar studies in the 1950s which found that most waders migrating at night across the North Sea set off up to three hours before dusk.

Few birds moved on evenings with head- or cross-winds, or when there was no wind at all. Clearly, the birds like to maximise wind assistance. Rain, mist and "flabby" low pressure systems halted movement. Not surprisingly, the best movements occurred on evenings after a few days with adverse conditions – as occurred on the afternoon of 28th July when the skies cleared after three days of mist and rain, and the wind swung round to a NW force 5. That evening I recorded a minimum of 422 birds of eight species leaving the estuary. The sky was buzzing with departing waders, and as I was alone it was impossible to detect and count all the flocks, especially those of the smaller birds.

The most numerous species during the month were Redshank and Oystercatcher. The numbers of Redshank were unprecedented for Loch Gruinart; even so, it is possible that I had missed the early part of the migration (*BWP* notes that Icelandic Redshanks can reach the UK by the end of June). The turnover of Oystercatchers was also remarkable. Numbers on the estuary remained more or less constant at 100-200 birds throughout July, but over 900 birds were seen leaving the estuary during the month! Clearly there were many migrants arriving to replace those that were moving on. The number of Oystercatchers moving appeared to increase as July progressed, so

The author wader watching. (James Clark)

Table 1. Counts of waders and other shorebirds at Loch Gruinart in July 2002.

Date	Wind	Shelduck	Oyk	R. Plover	Dunlin	Bar-t Godwit	Curlew	Redshank*	Greenshank	Turnstone	B-h Gull	Sandwich Tern	Arctic Tern	Total
08/07/02	Tail	-	-	-	-	-	-	270	-	-	-	-	-	270
09/07/02	Tail	-	-	-	-	4	-	42	-	-	-	-	-	46
10/07/02	Tail	-	-	-	-	-	-	156	-	-	-	-	-	156
11/07/02	Cross	-	106	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	4	-	112
12/07/02	None	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
13/07/02	Head	-	-	-	18	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18
14/07/02	None	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
15/07/02	Tail	-	119	-	-	-	-	50	-	-	7	-	8	184
16/07/02	Cross	18	9	-	18	-	-	9	-	-	-	-	-	54
17/07/02	Tail	-	157	-	-	-	-	13	5	-	-	-	-	175
18/07/02	None	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	4	-	4	13
19/07/02	Tail	-	68	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	68
20/07/02	Tail	-	80	-	-	4	5	1	-	-	-	-	3	93
21/07/02	No count													nc
22/07/02	No count													nc
23/07/02	Tail	-	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	100
24/07/02	Head	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
25/07/02	Misty	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
26/07/02	Rain	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
27/07/02	Rain	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0
28/07/02	Tail	5	271	17	75	-	-	47	-	5	-	-	-	420
29/07/02	No count							20						20
Total	19 counts	23	910	17	116	8	5	606	5	5	13	4	15	1729

* Includes 42 Redshank leaving Loch Gorm on 9th, and 20 leaving Loch Gruinart on 29th when systematic counts were not carried out.

it seems likely that many more would have been recorded had the observations continued into August.

A variety of other species was recorded in small numbers, including Arctic and Sandwich Terns, Black-headed Gull, Arctic Skua and Shelduck. One surprise was the almost complete absence of migrating Curlews, which were the commonest wader on the estuary throughout July, with over 300 present on most days. Presumably they migrate at a different time of year.

Migrating Oystercatchers are great fun to watch and easy to count. They call excitedly on the ground as if building up courage for departure. When they do take off, they're impossible to miss, their dazzling plumage catching the evening light and their calls penetrating any wind. Around and around they fly in noisy groups, gaining height and summoning others to join them. Eventually they head off south – but some waiverers may still change their minds and drop back down to the estuary, leaving only the nucleus of hardcore migrants to begin their journey. There can be few more exciting sights in the birding world than witnessing birds at the outset of their migrations.

Where have they come from? Where are they going to? How long will they fly for? It seems likely that the Redshanks are adult birds from Iceland (or possibly the Outer Hebrides) heading for estuaries in southern Scotland, NW England or Wales. It was notable that Redshanks tended to leave Islay on a SSE or SE bearing which would take them to these locations.

By contrast, most of the Oystercatchers left directly southwards. This would take them to Ireland, with Belfast Lough being a possible first stop-off. The waders here are counted daily on the RSPB's reserve. Data supplied by Ivan Quail show a rapid build-up of Oystercatchers from late July to mid-August. If the Islay migrants are, indeed, heading for wintering grounds in Ireland, then the BTO *Migration Atlas* suggests that these birds probably hail from Iceland or the Faeroes. However, a ringing recovery in Islay in August of a chick from the Outer Hebrides indicates, not surprisingly, that more "local" birds are also involved.

Observations of visible migration raise more questions than they provide answers, but it's great to see some of those lines in the *Migration Atlas* being acted out before your very eyes! This autumn I hope to extend the period covered and to look for colour-ringed birds. And if you're wondering how to while away those migrant-free July evenings and you have a wader estuary near you, why not head down there and see what's on the move? Any estuary should do, but my hot tips for large numbers of waders would include those oriented towards the south, their coasts acting as leading lines for departing migrants. First place would have to go to the south end of Loch Ryan, with interesting seconds provided by the landward ends of the Firth of Tay, the Moray and Cromarty Firths and, possibly, Musselburgh.

Clive McKay
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Frantically-feeding Redshanks sparked off an interest in wader migration at Loch Gruinart. (Graham Checkley)

BIRD ARTISTS IN SCOTLAND
- Keith Brockie

The illustrations in this article, the third in our series featuring some of the country's top bird and wildlife artists, are from Keith's latest book, *Rural Portraits*, written by Polly Pullar and described by her below.

I came across the work of Keith Brockie in 1981 when I was given several copies of his first book, *Keith Brockie's Wildlife Sketchbook*, for my 21st birthday. My friends clearly thought that I would appreciate it. They were right - I was overwhelmed by the enormous talent of this brilliant young wildlife artist whose observations of flora and fauna were the best I had seen.

As the pages unfolded, his portrayals of birds and mammals, and in particular the owls, the Red Squirrels, and the cover, a nesting Eider duck, were so startlingly good that the book was to become one of my most treasured possessions. This early work was truly phenomenal and showed the huge skill of a young wildlife artist on the brink of major recognition. The magnificent attention to detail showed not only great understanding of his subjects, but a distinctive style that captured them, especially with the way in which their eyes sparkled with vibrancy.

Keith Brockie and friend. (Polly Pullar)

Three years later, a second book, *One Man's Island,* followed and recorded a year spent on the Isle of May, an important seabird breeding island in the Firth of Forth. This firmly placed Keith at the forefront of natural-history illustration. During his time on the May, he was accompanied by a permanently disabled Golden Eagle found with a broken wing on a Highland estate. The bird was sometimes kept in one of the island's old walled gardens and fed on the abundant rabbit supply. Keith lived in the redundant lighthouse, the Low Light, also the island's bird observatory, and spent his days sketching seabirds, many of the migrants which passed through, the Grey Seals, and the beautiful maritime flora. The end result was outstanding and, like his first book, proved hugely popular.

After this, several others followed including *The Silvery Tay* which depicted the flora and fauna of one of Scotland's most famous rivers, and then *Mountain Reflections.* A book on the wildlife of Cuaderno de Campo in Spain and *Drawn from Nature* were added to the list, as well as a long and extensive collection of monographs illustrated by Keith, including *The Golden Eagle, The Puffin, The Sparrowhawk, The Kestrel* and *Barn Owls.*

Ever since he was a youth, most of Keith's time has been spent closely observing wildlife. Biking round East Lothian armed with sketchbook and binoculars, the early pictures show a great understanding of his subjects but a constant questing to understand them better. Sketching many of them through his telescope, he finds that he can be close to them without causing any disturbance. Most of his subjects are found close to home. The Brown Hare and the Lapwing remain two of his favourite models. But he is also widely travelled and has worked all over the world with artists' and environmental projects including several with the Artists for Nature Foundation in Schiermonnikoog, the Netherlands, Biezbra Valley, the Copper River Delta, the New Forest and the Briere Marshes. He has also participated in expeditions with the British Schools Exploring Society and was an assistant leader in Greenland and Svalbard where he taught field sketching.

His interest in natural history spread to bird ringing. During his teens Keith acquired his trainee's licence and his own mistnets, ringing thousands of over 160 different species ranging from the diminutive Goldcrest to the Golden Eagle. For the past 20 years Keith has been monitoring and ringing Tayside's burgeoning Osprey population. This valuable work has taken him to many unusual locations where he has often rebuilt nests for Ospreys when

their own have collapsed, or been too vulnerably placed. In 1982 there were only four known pairs of Ospreys in Tayside, now there are more than 50 pairs. In recent years, some have taken to nesting on pylons and Keith has liased with the Hydro Board who occasionally bring young Ospreys down from the top for him to ring.

Constantly battling with the persistence of egg thieves, his work in catching many of them has been admirable, and has often involved hours of walking into remote places, marking eggs and constant surveillance. When, on one occasion, a particular pair was robbed yet again, Keith, never content to do things half-heartedly, employed the skills of the Marine 45 Commando from Condor, Arbroath. They dug themselves in below the problem tree and lay in wait. As the crook descended the tree with the eggs, he was given a short sharp shock as four burly marines suddenly emerged from their dugout. Later, when Keith was asked about the incident by the press, his glorious understatement was memorable. He simply said that he was just getting a bit fed up with this particular nest being robbed.

It could be said that Keith is an artist with altitude, for he thinks nothing of shinning up to the top of large trees, hooking himself on to an uppermost branch, and sketching young Ospreys and other birds from a precarious aerial position. He insists that sketching from life can never be substituted by working from photographs. This is one of many reasons why his paintings and sketches live and breathe.

He has also monitored Golden Eagles and Peregrines for many years and knows both species intimately. In recent years, eagles have failed to breed successfully in many parts of Tayside, largely due to dwindling prey sources. Much of Scotland is hugely overgrazed and it has been bitterly disappointing to see so many eagles persistently failing.

Some years ago while ringing a pair of Ospreys I had been monitoring, Keith and I discussed the possibilities of working together on a book about Scotland's native farm animals. At that time Keith regarded sheep as white lice on the hills, but despite this, he was very interested in the idea, and so *Rural Portraits – Scotland's Native Farm Animals, Characters & Landscapes* developed and has taken us on a long journey all round Scotland. Through meetings with many of the characters who keep each breed, the book evolved and it is their stories and anecdotes which have shaped the chapters. The people have helped me to record a vital part of Scotland's heritage at a time when rural life is undergoing radical change. We have also included much of the wildlife and scenery that we encountered on our journey. Though we were hampered by lack of funding and the dreadful Foot-and-Mouth epidemic, I was determined to continue with the project as nothing like this has ever been done before.

Having never painted farm livestock before, Keith was astounded at how fascinating they proved as subjects, and found the textures and characters of the different breeds totally absorbing. But he wrongly thought that they would be easier to approach than his wildlife subjects. The fantastic, wild and wiry, seaweed-eating sheep of North Ronaldsay soon proved him wrong.

As well as portraying every breed, usually in its native habitat, Keith has also included some dramatic portraits of a few of the people too. Perhaps it would be fair to say that not all of his female subjects appreciated his minute attention to detail. Why is it that a lined and ruddy complexion and weather-beaten look is so much more acceptable on the male visage? The 115 paintings from the book will be on display at three venues over the summer and it is my hope that they will help to raise awareness of the breeds, of the vital importance of their survival, and also of the survival of Scottish rural life. For Keith, this has been a totally new departure, and the completion of such a project has been a huge achievement. He has done far more finished paintings than for his previous books, and has moved on to a different plane, one in which the end result shows great development and maturity.

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Keith Brockie's Gallery is open at weekends or by appointment. Fearnan Gallery, Fearnan, by Aberfeldy, Perthshire PH15 2PG. Phone 01887 830609. *www.keithbrockie.co.uk*

Birdwatching from the Waverley

For a unique way of viewing seabirds in the Firth of Clyde, why not take a cruise on the world's last sea-going paddle steamer *Waverely* this summer? She sails from Ayr and Glasgow, as well as 10 other seaside towns, from mid-June until the end of August. The SOC Stewartry branch has made many trips on the ship and some members are now so hooked that they make several cruises every summer! Either remaining on board or going ashore, it is an excellent way, particularly for less active club members, to enjoy many species of seabird.

Of course, it is best to choose a dry day, otherwise not much of the birdlife or the magnificent scenery will be visible. If you're a bad sailor there is no need to worry as *Waverley* is so broad in the beam that she does not move very much. Indeed, if it is rough there is compensation, as these conditions are best for seeing Manx Shearwaters gliding and banking over the waves.

Ailsa Craig's large colonies of seabirds are easily viewed from *Waverley* as she sails around the island. The highest point on "Paddy's Milestone", as the island is nicknamed, is 1,114' and sheer cliffs rise abruptly to about 700' on three sides. The recent increase in Gannets can be seen clearly as the birds are taking over more and more of the grassy slopes above the cliffs. From about 12,000 pairs in 1975, numbers rose to 32,455 "Apparently Occupied Sites" in 1995. Add to the Gannets thousands of Fulmars, Cormorants, Shags, Kittiwakes, Guillemots and Razorbills plus, hopefully, a few of the Puffins which now nest on Ailsa after the eradication of rats (as reported in *SBN* 66), this is a seabird spectacular not to be missed.

Manx Shearwaters have increased in the Firth of Clyde recently (see *SBN* 65: 8). Nowadays, as soon as *Waverley* clears Ayr harbour on any trip in July and August, they are usually present in good numbers. Last summer, Manx Shearwaters were even floating just off the pier at Largs and must have been clearly visible from the shore - if any of the holidaymakers on the sands had been interested enough to look! On one occasion there were the hundreds sitting on the flat calm water between Ayr and Little Cumbrae before the morning mist had cleared.

You never know what might turn up on the *Waverley* trips. What was that enormous bird flapping slowly south away from us down the west coast of Arran? It was the same summer that a Sea Eagle was reported off the island! And not only is a *Waverley* cruise a good way to watch seabirds, but it also good for Basking Sharks, Harbour Porpoises and Grey Seals. In some years Man o' War jellyfish can be seen in their hundreds. Last year's "tick" was the P&O liner *Royal Princess* in the channel between Great and Little Cumbrae. She was enormous seen from the deck of the little *Waverley* and was quite a sight when tier upon tier of her decks were lit up in the evening as she sailed south down Arran's east coast whilst *Waverley* headed for Ayr.

Waders such as Oystercatcher, Redshank and Turnstone can be seen on the breakwater at Ayr harbour, on the small rocky islands off Millport, on the shore at Largs and on the rocky islands in the Kyles of Bute. Buzzards can be spotted hanging over the hills, Red-throated Divers and

The Waverley, *the world's last sea-going paddle steamer. (Joan Howie)*

Red-breasted Mergansers in the Kyles of Bute, and Cormorant, Shag, Eider (in various plumages), "comic" and Sandwich Terns can always be seen. Ayr is the best place for Black Guillemots, flying at full speed into their nest holes in the harbour walls. At the end of the breeding season, adult Guillemots and Razorbills, each with a large chick, can be seen all over the area, the former far outnumbering the latter.

There is no need to spend the whole day aboard the paddler. To add a few more birds to the day's list, the energetic can go ashore at Brodick, Millport or Rothesay and hire bicycles to see a bit more of each island. Or take a walk ashore at Brodick, Millport or Tighnabruaich. If you're totally mad, walk the 10 miles around Great Cumbrae after landing at Millport. Whatever you choose to do ashore, make sure you have a reliable watch - *Waverley* is usually dead on time when she returns to pick up passengers at the end of the day!

For a really enjoyable cruise, add to the birds the scenery. Lit by the morning sun the view of Goatfell and the other Arran hills from Millport is quite stunning. The panorama from the north end of Great Cumbrae up the Clyde estuary to the Argyll hills is almost as impressive. In the evening, as *Waverley* leaves Brodick, Goatfell is back-lit by the sinking sun and makes the wake sparkle, whilst the hills to the north stand out at the end of a perfect summer's day. (Yes, there are a few of these each year, even in the west). Perhaps, for some, the end to a truly perfect day might be when a huge wave lands on the branch secretary and not on any other member of the group!

Joan Howie
Stewartry Branch Secretary

Turnstones can be seen on rocky shores and islets on a Waverley *cruise. (John Busby)*

NOTES & COMMENT

Bullfinches on seed feeders

Bullfinches have been regular visitors to our garden in Colinton, Edinburgh, for many years, particularly in late winter. Until this year they have customarily been fairly unobtrusive, feeding within trees on buds or Ash seeds. However, early in the year we noticed that they had taken to feeding on the ground in the vicinity of feeders dispensing mixed seed and sunflower seed. (The former was providing good pickings for several species because of the habit of tits of ejecting less favoured seeds in search of sunflower seeds). This was in itself an apparent change in behaviour of a normally secretive species. Then in late March there was a further change when Bullfinches began to take food directly from the feeders, with one bird at least rapidly becoming very accomplished.

We had been unaware of such behaviour in Bullfinches, of which there is no mention in *BWP*. This seems to be yet another species (see *SBN* 67: 1-2 and 18 for references to, respectively, Goldfinch and Treecreeper) beginning to tap the abundant supply of 'artificial' food now provided in gardens throughout the land.

John & Frances Davies

The occurrence of Bullfinches at feeders seems to be well established down south, although even there it is a relatively recent phenomenon, hence no mention of it in BWP *(the appropriate volume was published as long ago as 1994). Redpolls and Linnets are also regular birdtable visitors in England (the Birdguides* CD-ROM Guide to Garden Birds *shows small flocks of them feeding on sunflower hearts). It is probably safe to assume that these species will eventually adopt the habit up here (if they haven't already done so?), but why they and Goldfinches should be lagging behind their southern counterparts is unclear. On the other hand, Crossbills seem to have first discovered the delights of peanuts at the opposite end of the country - migrants have been reported visiting nut baskets in Shetland and Fair Isle this spring (see www.pennington.charitydays.co.uk/latest birds.htm and www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk/ latest.htm). It will be interesting to see if and when this habit moves south.*

The Goldfinch article in SBN *67 also prompted Isabel McLaren from Melrose to report that that "Up to two years ago I only had Goldfinches and the occasional Bullfinch on my Aubretia seeds and the odd pansy I left to seed for them. I now seldom get Bullfinches, but for the past two years I have regularly had two Goldfinches on my peanuts. So far they haven't tried the seed mixture, including sunflower, on my birdtable". Coincidentally, the day that* SBN *67 went to press in mid-March my mother reported Goldfinches at her peanuts in a rural garden at Dirleton, East Lothian. These were the first she had seen feeding in this way in 30 years! Goldfinches have been regular visitors to her garden over this time and peanuts have been available every day bar none.*

Mark Holling's Treecreeper observation prompted a response from Anne Jenkins who twice saw one feeding from a nut holder in her garden at Kippen, Stirlingshire, during a hard spell last winter. From further afield, Jennifer Spring-Smyth reports Treecreepers feeding on peanuts in her New Forest garden in February 1998, January 2002 and January and February this year. The bird fed on and under the feeder and, positioned like a Great Spotted Woodpecker, "attacked peanuts with positive strikes". If this technique has been practised for at least five years, it is strange that it hasn't become more popular and widespread by now. Ed.

Unusual Chaffinch

This unusual Chaffinch first appeared in my garden in Gourock, Inverclyde in the summer of 1997. It also visits other gardens in the area, but does not appear to mix well with other Chaffinches and is always on its own. Its plumage remains the same throughout the year. One of the few concessions it makes to being an adult male Chaffinch is that its bill is pinkish in the breeding season, but bluish (as in the photograph) at other times.

Frances Gatens

The Gourock Chaffinch. (Frances Gatens)

This appears to be a case of erythrism, a condition in which there is an excess of red pigment in the plumage. Do erythritic birds tend to be less pinky orange than this Chaffinch, however, and more brown or chestnutty (such as in the rufous Tawny Owl, the predominant colour phase in this country, or the "hepatic" Cuckoo)? Perhaps it is displaying some other aberration or schizochroism? Ed.

Birding or Birdwatching?

I would like to comment on Mr Jimmy Maxwell's article in *SBN* 67. Firstly, I abhor the term "birding". It is not clear to me what the term is trying to signify. So I tried looking it up in the Chambers Dictionary: "**Bird'ing** *noun* the hunting or snaring of birds; bird-watching". 'Bird-watching' on the other hand is defined as: "**Bird'-watching** the observation of birds in their natural habitat".

I hope that no SOC member would hunt or snare birds and Waterston House is not being set up to trap birds, but to enable us to observe them in their natural habitat. So why use such an ambiguous word as "birding" in the description of the Scottish ? Resource Centre. My hobby is watching birds and I am perfectly happy with Bird-watching as a description. Let's use it to describe Waterston House - The Scottish Bird-watching Resource Centre.

John R Hamilton

Which does, of course, introduce the contentious issue of the hyphen... Ed.

Why do we have to slavishly follow the Americans in everything even to the extent nowadays of renaming our major interest/hobby? Take a look at these dictionary definitions of the original meaning of the words under discussion: **Birder** "A catcher or hunter of birds; especially a person who kills in quantity for the market" (Websters Dictionary; America). **Birding** "The hunting, shooting, snaring or catching of birds" (Chambers Dictionary, Scotland). **Birdwatching** "The observation (and identifying) of (wild) birds in their natural surroundings (or habitat)". Chambers, Collins, Oxford and Websters have almost the same wording.

It is also worth noting that the biography of Roger Tory Peterson, who was an American and a contemporary of George Waterston, contains a chapter headed "Call ME a BIRDWATCHER!". To quote but a sentence from this chapter - "The term, he says, is a good one, for it covers everyone from enthusiastic aficionados of the sport to behavioral (*sic*) scientists like Niko Tinbergen and Konrad Lorenz, to ecologists...and to wildlife technicians and administrators...".

If we use the American term "birding", would we have to spell "centre" as "center'?! What is wrong with being a British birdwatcher who goes birdwatching and, of course, also being a Scottish ornithologist?

Joan Howie

REVIEWS

Birdwatching in Ayrshire and Arran by SOC Ayrshire Branch. 2003. 30 pp, numerous maps, 60 colour photos. Available free from the Ayrshire Branch, tourist information centres and RSPB Lochwinnoch. See www.ayrshire-birding.org.uk for more details.

The Ayrshire Branch is to be congratulated on producing a really attractive, instructive and useful guide to a relatively well-watched area of west Central Scotland. This free booklet has been partly funded by grants from three Ayrshire councils under and "Awards for All" scheme and is an excellent example of what can be achieved by a dedicated group.

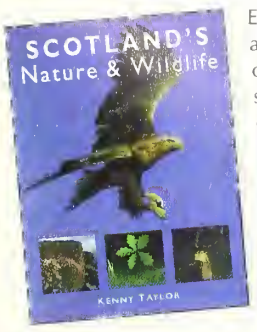
The booklet provides a guide to 86 of the best birding localities of the area, with a brief description of each location including disabled and vehicular access and the availability of local public transport. This is followed by a selected list of the expected birds and some information on seasonal variations. Although somewhat brief by necessity, there is more than enough to whet the appetite of both local and visiting birdwatchers. The booklet is extremely well set out with a wealth of good colour photographs of birds and sites.

I highly recommend this informative guide. Its format and design should be considered a model for those other regions of Scotland which have yet to produce a birdwatching guide.

David Clugston

Scotland's Nature and Wildlife by Kenny Taylor. 2002. Lomond Books, Edinburgh. 224 pp, numerous colour photographs and maps, b&w drawings. ISBN 1-84204-025-1. Hbk. £15.00.

The author's stated aim of this book is to point people in the right direction to get to know the wildlife of Scotland. The book begins with an introduction and overview of the country's wildlife and habitats, then progresses into a more focussed region-by-region guide to what can be seen at various sites during the year.

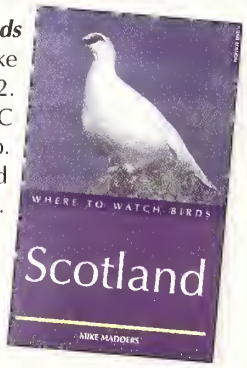


Each regional section is accompanied by a colour map pinpointing sites, and plenty of good quality colour photographs and black-and-white drawings. The general text describing popular sites is interspersed with occasional cut-away boxes such as "Regional Highlights" and "Did you know?" sections. There are also areas focussing on particular species.

The main body of the text itself manages to pack a reasonable amount of information into quite small sections. It would be nice to know a little more about the species which are listed, but given the geographical scope of the book, it is hardly surprising that there are constraints of space. The text also includes some useful practical help, such as information on car parking.

Scotland's Nature and Wildlife probably would not appeal to those looking for more in-depth information about sites or species and subsequently can seem a little frustrating at times. Despite this, and a rather uninspiring front cover, it is an ideal guide for the first-time visitor wishing to find out more about the kind of habitat Scotland has to offer and where to look for some of our more interesting natural gems. It would be equally at home on the coffee table of any Scot who needs some inspiration as to where to begin exploring their country.

Caroline Scott



Where to Watch Birds in Scotland by Mike Madders. 2002. Christopher Helm/A&C Black, London. 297 pp. Numerous maps and b&w drawings. Sbk. ISBN 0-7136-5693. £14.99.

This is the fourth edition of one of a familiar series and includes a customary comprehensive list of sites and what might be found in them. If you have a copy of an earlier edition it is doubtful if you will need to buy this version as the updating is not obvious (eg we are told that Nuthatch has been recorded at the Hirsel and bred in 1989).

John G Davies

Outer Hebrides Bird Report 2001. Edited by Andrew Stevenson. Published by Curracag, the Western Isles Natural History Society. 64 pp. £5.50 (incl p&p) from the editor at The Old Stores, Bornish, South Uist HS8 5SA.

The numbers of resident birders in and visiting birders to these underwatched islands is increasing. While the tourists get their thrills from unusual migrants (see, for example, Stuart Green's article in *Birding Scotland* 5: 172-177), the natives can be excited by local rarities such as Great Crested Grebe (one in March was only the islands' 14th record), Sandwich Tern (three records in 2001) and Mistle Thrush (two).

The year got off to a flying start with three new area records - Lesser Scaup, Lesser White-fronted Goose and Mediterranean Gull. Spring migration was fairly eventful and some of the best birds, such as Rustic Bunting and Icterine Warbler, co-operated by turning up in gardens! Interesting breeders included a rise in Corncrake numbers and attempted breeding by Whooper Swans. A "trickle of crossbills from June became a flood by July", with a bonus in the shape of a Parrot Crossbill ringed on Lewis. Westerly gales in September made for good seawatching and a sprinkling of Nearctic species including Laughing Gull on Barra ("at the airport waiting on its flight back to the USA!"). Easterly winds into October produced a run of scarce migrants. These were eclipsed, however, by Eye-browed Thrush on St Kilda and a Coal Tit on Barra! The rest of the year was relatively quiet apart from influxes of Iceland Gulls and Snow Buntings in December.

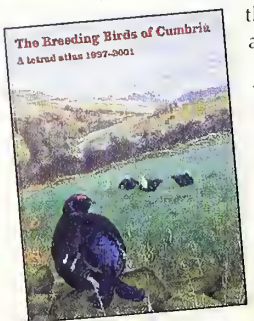
The report is detailed and informative, although the font size is just a bit small for my advancing presbyopia. The line-drawings by Andrew Stevenson and Bill Neill are very attractive and often quirky - I would have liked more of them! Future issues will reveal if birding and bird records continue to increase in the Outer Hebrides; this excellent report certainly gives a tantalising taste of what can be found in these windswept isles.

Mike Fraser

The Breeding Birds of Cumbria. *A tetrad atlas 1997-2001.* Edited by Malcolm Stott, John Callion, Ian Kinley, Colin Rave and Jeremy Roberts. 2002. Cumbria Bird Club. Hbk. ISBN 0-9549249-0-0. £30.00 + £7.00 p&p from CBC Treasurer, 10 Winder Gate, Frizington, CA26 3QS (cheques payable to "Cumbria Bird Club"). See www.cumbriabirdclub.freeserve.co.uk

Cumbria is a large and varied county and, bordering as it does on Dumfriesshire and Roxburghshire, is of interest to Scottish birders. This is an excellent production and I would recommend it to everyone with an interest in bird distribution, wherever they live. Particularly impressive is the speed with which it has been produced – the fieldwork was completed in summer 2001 and it was published in autumn 2002. Most of the work was done in just four years, an incredible effort for such a large area. It's a shame that in Scotland we cannot match the manpower required to cover comparable rural areas in so little time.

As a co-author of *The Breeding Birds of South-east Scotland*, I was especially keen to see this work. The varied terrain, the area of remote countryside and the number of tetrads surveyed is similar in the two areas. When the Cumbria Atlas was in the final stages of production, I was delighted to hear that our atlas had been used as a model, so I was a little disappointed that the final publication makes no comparison with that work, nor even an acknowledgement.



The Cumbria Atlas follows the usual format with thorough descriptions of the area covered and the

methodologies used, followed by species accounts with maps. There are fine landscape photographs and line illustrations (of a rather dated style) of each species mapped. The species accounts are detailed and easy to read, but frequently spend too long describing the species and too little describing the maps. Although sites are mentioned in the text, their location on the map is not given and the reader has to refer to the appendix of place names which only gives 10km squares, not tetrads. The maps could be clearer – they are coloured to indicate relief (useful), but land below 100m is green and the dots indicating distribution are also green. This is a particular problem for scarcer species.

These are minor niggles, though. I am particularly impressed with the ways that this atlas takes the development of county bird atlases forward. Lessons have clearly been learnt from the more rigorous methodology of the last BTO Atlas. The main visits to tetrads were timed and adult birds counted enabling production of abundance maps using different sized dots. Supplementary data, by tetrad, were also collected to ensure the accuracy of the distribution maps and to involve a wider group of observers. In addition, line-transect data were collected for 141 1km squares, using methodology similar to the BTO Breeding Bird Survey, and the results used to calculate population estimates for the majority of species, coupled with national land classification data. This is a similar method to that used in the SE Scotland Atlas, but we did not have the foresight in 1988 to collect line transect data. These methods are all repeatable and enhance the value of the Cumbria atlas for future comparisons. All future Bird Atlases should follow these leads, as estimates of numbers are as important as the distribution of species in a local context. If you are interested in bird distributions and numbers, then do buy this book. I have no hesitation in recommending it to atlasphiles. Congratulations to the team behind it.

Mark Holling

Birds in Counties. **First supplement** by David K Ballance. 2002. Isabelline Books, Falmouth. 106 pp. Sbk. ISBN 0 9542955-0-1. £16.95.

The author and publisher are to be congratulated in producing this first supplement which corrects, expands and updates the important new standard reference work on *Birds in Counties* (2000) in such short time scale. The Channel Islands have now been included in an eight-page chapter. An essential reference work not to be missed.

David Clugston

Stonechats. A Guide to the Genus **Saxicola** by Ewan Urquhart. 2002. Christopher Helm, London. 320 pp, 13 colour plates by Adam Bowley, numerous photos. Hbk. ISBN 0-7136-6024. £37.00.

This book describes a most attractive group of passerines. The species accounts cover taxonomy, identification, description, distribution and status, breeding habitat, voice, food, movements, behaviour, moult and conservation

in exhaustive detail, reflecting the author's impressive industry and knowledge.

There is more to *Saxicola* than our familiar Stonechat and Whinchat. Its 14 members are widespread in the Old World, from Siberian Stonechat to Stoliczka's Bushchat of northeast India and Réunion Stonechat, an island endemic. The "Common Stonechat" is here split into three species: *S. torquata* becomes the African Stonechat, described by Linnaeus in 1766 from a specimen obtained at the Cape of Good Hope, pre-dating "our" bird which is now the European Stonechat *S. rubicola*. Siberian Stonechat *S. maura* completes the trio. *S. dacotiae* is colloquially renamed Canary Island (*sic*) Stonechat because it presently occurs on only one island in the group. (By which argument shouldn't it be Fuerteventura Stonechat?). But this is daft - there is no such place as "Canary Island" and should we rename birds as their ranges diminish? Stick to "Canary Islands Stonechat", which is geographically correct, has historical precedence and would at least be the right name if it was ever reintroduced to other islands.

The short section on molecular phylogeny by Hans Wink *et al* might leave some readers cold, but it seems to me very sensible to have all available information on the genus within the pages of one volume. And non-scientific birders needn't worry because, notwithstanding the table of "pyhlogenetically informative characters of turdids", it is a good deal more comprehensible than your average home-appliance instruction manual, and considerably more interesting.

The illustrations successfully capture the distinctive shape and poise of the group. I suspect it's the repro, but the colours are sometimes rather too cool and fail to convey the gorgeous warmth of the russet, tawny and orange tones that typify many of these birds. Different plumages and even suspected hybrids are shown in the numerous photographs and are a valuable inclusion.

This painstaking and complex account might not be for the faint-hearted, but I recommend it to anyone with any interest in or affection for its subjects, and that must be the majority of us. The price might seem a lot for rather a few species, but they are, after all, great little birds!

Mike Fraser

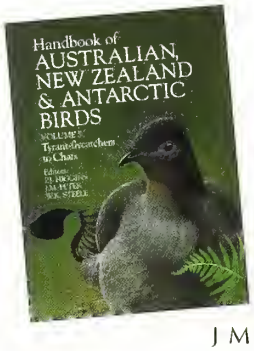
Collins Illustrated Checklist: Birds of Western & Central Africa by Ber van Perlo. 2002. HarperCollins. 384pp. Hbk. ISBN 0 00 220118 6. £19.99.

Until very recently, west Africa was poorly covered for field guides, but now guides have appeared for The Gambia and Senegal and for Liberia, as well as Borrow and Demey's *Birds of West Africa*. The latter is a bit of a doorstop and could not be used in the field. Stepping into the breach comes the latest of van Perlo's illustrated checklists which is certainly small enough to use in the field.

Brief introductory sections describe the region covered - the arc of countries around the Gulf of Guinea from Democratic Republic of Congo to Mauritania and including the Sahel and southern Saharan countries, and its major habitats, climate and geography. The major part of the book is taken up with the illustrated checklist, which is slightly more than a checklist, giving brief notes on appearance, habits and habitat, but not quite a field guide. The back of the book contains distribution maps which, despite having the sea printed in yellow, are quite difficult to read as the seasonal distributions are shown in monochrome shades and patterns. On the whole, I am also not a great fan of the illustrative style of van Perlo. I do not think the illustrations are sharp enough and the colours are just a bit too bright. This gives them a "cartoonish" feel.

In comparison with *Birds of The Gambia and Senegal* (Barlow *et al*) it is not nearly so detailed, and for that area the dedicated field guide would be the better buy. For those areas not covered by a regional guide I think this book would be useful for the field, but a copy of Borrow and Demey would be an essential backup.

David J Kelly



Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds. Vol 5 Tyrant-flycatchers to Chats. Edited by P J Higgins, J M Peter and W K Steele. 2001. 1,269 pp, 44 colour plates, b&w drawings, maps. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0 19 553258.9. £160.00

The latest in this hugely impressive seven-volume series, in the mould of *BWP*, describes 118 species, from Eastern Kingbird (a vagrant to South Georgia) to Gibberbird (endemic to arid Australia). The families covered are tyrant-flycatchers, New Zealand wrens, pittas, lyrebirds, scrub-birds, Australasian treecreepers, and honeyeaters and Australian chats. The last-named (the diverse, pugnacious and ecologically-important Meliphagidae) alone occupy 804 pages. The detailed treatment and clarity of presentation of such a mass of information are outstanding. Some of the region's most attractive species are featured, such as Superb Lyrebird, Lovely Fairy-wren and Rainbow Pitta. These and the others are done full justice in the colour plates.

Invasive alien organisms, habitat destruction and altered fire-regime continue to take their toll of the region's bird species, many of them endemic. This publication may become the last repository of information on some of them, but will be the major reference for all of them for years to come. Congratulations to the contributors, editors and publisher on another remarkable volume. I look forward to number six!

Mike Fraser

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REQUEST: Birds of Lumsdaine and Dowlaw

As part of a Millennium Commission Award, this summer I am setting up a project to monitor bird populations in the Borders Coastal Area from Lumsdaine to Dowlaw. Local farmers are involved and the long-term aim is to link bird numbers with land management. So I am keen to receive details of any sightings from the area, however mundane. (Some of you must visit the area even when there aren't any Cranes on Dowlaw Dam?!). Records of species, numbers and dates are required, and additional details of precise location and habitat or vegetation-type are particularly welcome.

Please send your records to Richard Eagles, "Wheatears", Lumsdaine, Coldingham TD14 5UA.
Ph 018907 71375.
Email: susan_richard@lineone.net

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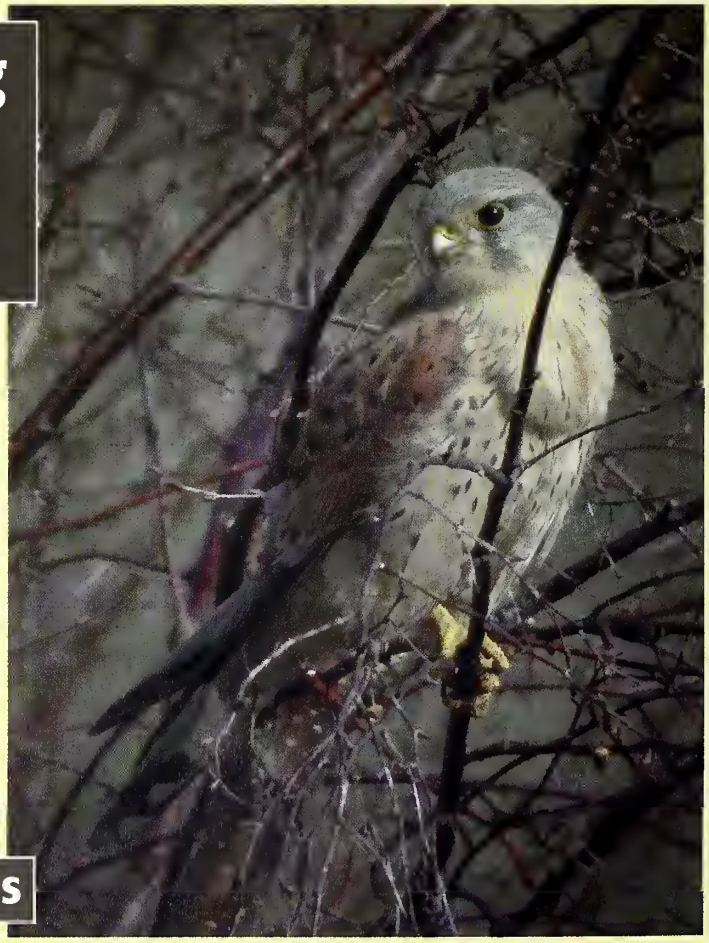

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RECENT REPORTS

Spring Review

This was a period when many of the common migrants arrived earlier than normal (though not necessarily in good numbers), with several scarcities also breaking early arrival records. In March, for example, **Chiffchaff** arrived especially early following the first reported bird in Renfrewshire on 14th, with their numbers in Scotland being more akin to the first week of April than the third week of March. **Osprey** was also very early, with an unprecedented three seen in Highland on 12th Mar, whilst several **Willow Warblers** were reported from SW Scotland in the last week of the month.

Into April, and the early theme was maintained by some of the warblers, in particular, with both **Whitethroat** and **Sedge Warbler** arriving two weeks earlier than normal in several areas. **Swifts**, too, were early, with one reported from Inshriach (Highland) on 16th Apr, followed by 40+ at Strathclyde Loch (Lanarkshire) on 27th and an exceptional 250 at Loch Gelly (Fife) on 29th. Those who were expecting rarities amongst these early birds were to be disappointed; at least everywhere apart from Shetland, where a fantastic selection of rare birds was seen in May.

Stop Press: *Scops Owl, Unst, Shetland, May 2003. (Hugh Harrop, Shetland Wildlife)*

Arguably, the bird of the spring was not on Shetland, however, but on Tiree, where a dark morph **Eleanora's Falcon** was present briefly on 1st May. There are only three previous accepted records for Britain, including one on the Outer Hebrides in 1985. Shetland was where the real action was, though, and May kicked-off there with a first-summer male **Dark-eyed Junco** on Out Skerries on 1st-9th. The American theme continued with a **White-throated Sparrow** on Fetlar on 10th-11th. From Europe came an **Alpine Swift**, also on Fetlar, on 5th May, with a **Western Bonelli's Warbler** at Scatness on 13th-15th. Most remarkable of all, a **Thick-billed Warbler** from Siberia was on Fair Isle on 16th-17th May. Found by Glen Tyler early in the morning on his return from watching the lunar eclipse, this is only the fourth for Britain and the fifth for Europe of this Far East enigma. All previous British records had been on Shetland but, predictably enough, all in autumn. Had this individual been wintering in Africa?

Mid-May brought 40+ **Red-backed Shrikes** on 12th-21st, all on the northern isles, along with four **Golden Orioles** in Shetland on 14th-19th, nine **Icterine Warblers** (all in Shetland) on 18th-21st, a **Marsh Warbler** on Fetlar on 22nd, five **Common Rosefinches** (again all in the northern isles!) on 17th-20th, six **Grey-headed Wagtails** from 17th (including a popular one near Torness, Lothian) and 11 **Bluethroats** in the northern isles with males reported earlier at Geosetter (Shetland) on 4th May and at Fife Ness (Fife) on 5th. Seven **Wrynecks** were reported from 18th Apr, the first being a showy bird at Fishtown of Usan (Angus); one on Whalsay on 24th Apr was the earliest for Shetland away from Fair Isle.

On Fair Isle there was a **Short-toed Lark** on 26th Apr. A female **Subalpine Warbler** was on the isle on 21st-22nd May, with an incredibly long stayer on Foula on 27th Apr–16th May. Fair Isle recorded **Little Bunting** on 9th May, **Spotted Crake** on 24th-26th (with one calling for its third consecutive year at Haroldswick on Unst on 20th May), **Nightingale** on 4th May (with singles on Unst on 26th Apr and North Ronaldsay on 17th May, plus a nightingale sp, probably **Thrush Nightingale**, on Whalsay on 18th May). A **Red-throated Pipit** was present along with the Thick-billed Warbler on 16th May.

After a very good winter and early spring there were three reports of very late **Great Grey Shrikes** in mid May - in Perthshire, Argyll and on Shetland. Small numbers of **Waxwings** were present throughout Apr, with a singing male in Sutherland on 21st May. Seven migrant **Hawfinches** were reported this spring, including the earliest ever on Fair Isle on 3rd Mar, with a **Woodlark** present the same day. A **Firecrest** at Greenan on 2nd-12th Mar was only the third record for Ayrshire. Three others were seen in March and April in Lothian, Aberdeenshire and Shetland.

There was an exceptional count of 26 **Lapland Buntings** at Rattray Head (Aberdeenshire) on 3rd Mar with 24+ still there the next day and 10 on 7th. At least

Dark-eyed Junco, Out Skerries, Shetland, May 2003. (Hugh Harrop, Shetland Wildlife)

Grey-headed Wagtail, Torness, Lothian, May 2003. (Calum Scott)

nine were at Dowlaw (Borders) on 2nd Mar. Single **Shore Larks** were on North Ronaldsay (Orkney) on 19th Apr and Unst on 27th-28th; two were on Foula on 9th May, one remaining to 13th. **Hoopoes** were at Altnaharra (Highland) on at least 4th-18th Mar and on Lewis on 20th. Two **Bee-eaters** were at Drummore (Dumfries and Galloway) on 9th May; presumably the same birds were reported on Mull (Argyll) on 11th.

Perhaps the most significant ornithological event so far in Britain in 2003 took place on Lewis. Following an adult **White-billed Diver** found dead at Elie (Fife) on 22nd Mar, up to eight different birds were seen off the north side of Lewis between 18th Apr and 11th May, including four together on 19th Apr off Skigersta and, nearby, three together the next day off Port of Ness. A first-summer individual was seen in the Sound of Harris on 15th May, with one off North Ronaldsay on 10th Apr and up to three in Shetland between 4th-9th May.

Western Bonelli's Warbler, Scatness, Shetland, May 2003. (Hugh Harrop, Shetland Wildlife)

Thick-billed Warbler, Fair Isle, May 2003. (Hugh Harrop, Shetland Wildlife)

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Between 26th Apr and 22nd May, 2000+ **Pomarine Skuas** passed the Aird an Runair headland at Balranald on North Uist, including a record count of 1,147 on 13th May, with 765 Pomarine and 80 **Long-tailed Skuas** on 8th May. In Shetland, 21 Long-tailed and 727 Pomarine Skuas (the second highest single day count from there) passed Wats Ness on 14th May, with good numbers of Pomarines seen from various other sites including 201 past Lewis on 8th May and a notable 33, along with three Long-tailed, past Skye on the same day.

In a period where rare and scarce gulls were just that, an adult summer **Laughing Gull** present briefly by the RSPB Loch of Kinnordy reserve on 26th Apr (second record for Angus) was definitely the best find.

Amongst the more notable wildfowl reports, three of the five wintering **Lesser Scaups** in Scotland remained in April, one female on South Uist was still present on 5th with the two drakes in Dumfries and Galloway to 20th at least. Three **King Eiders** were seen: the drake at Loch Ryan (Dumfries and Galloway), a female on Shetland in Mar, and the regular female again at Leven/Aberlady Bay (Fife/Lothian) from 1st May. The best find, though, was the drake **Ferruginous Duck** at Loch Bhasapoll, Tiree (Argyll) on 21st-29th Apr – a true Scottish rarity. Three **Garganey** were seen at WWT Caerlaverock (Dumfries and Galloway) from 19th Mar with, nationally, 15 seen in Apr and 10+ in May. The adult **Ross's Goose** was last seen at Caerlaverock on 19th Apr, with another adult amongst Pink-footed Geese near Blackford (Perthshire) on 13th Apr.

King Eider, Aberlady, Lothian, May 2003. (Calum Scott)

Twelve **Cranes** were seen in March, three in April and 5+ in May. At least three **Little Egrets** were responsible for sightings in Argyll, Kinross, Angus, Aberdeenshire and Upper Forth in May. At least one **Spoonbill**

Spoonbill, Loch of Strathbeg, North-East Scotland, May 2003. (Harry Scott)

was present at RSPB Loch of Strathbeg (Aberdeenshire) from 23rd Apr. Also in April, three **White Storks** were seen, two together in Lothian, Fife and Highland and one which toured Lothian and Angus and was also reported in Ayrshire. It is possible that none of them were of wild origin.

Two small harrier sp (both females) were seen in April. One at Folly Loch (Borders) on 25th and one, identified as a **Montagu's Harrier**, at Aberlady Bay on 17th. Any small harrier these days is almost more likely to be Pallid, given that up to four different birds have been seen in Norfolk so far this year, as well as singles in Cornwall and Yorkshire this spring. No fewer than 12 were reported in Denmark and four in the Netherlands this April.

The presumed over-wintering **Pacific Golden Plover** was seen off and on in the North Boisdale area, South Uist up to 5th Apr. In May a **Buff-breasted Sandpiper** was at Aberlady Bay on 7th and a **Pectoral Sandpiper** on Foula on 11th-12th. That was about it for rare waders, although amongst scarcer species both **Green Sandpiper** and **Spotted Redshank** showed up well during April with 17 of the former and seven of the latter reported. Up to 10 **Wood Sandpipers** were seen from 26th Apr, whilst two **Avocets** in April were seen at Skinflats (Upper Forth) on 18th-19th, RSPB Loch of Strathbeg on 20th-23rd and then at Montrose Basin (Angus) on 26th. The Avocet is certainly spreading as a breeding species in Britain, so perhaps the first Scottish breeders are not that far off...?

Angus Murray, Birdline Scotland

Little Ringed Plover, Ayrshire, May 2003. (Brian Orr)

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The Scottish Ornithologists' Club (SOC) was established by a group of Scottish ornithologists who met together in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society in Edinburgh on 24th March 1936.

The Club now has 2200 members and 14 branches around Scotland. It plays a central role in Scottish birdwatching, bringing together amateur birdwatchers, keen birders and research ornithologists with the aims of documenting, studying and, not least, enjoying Scotland's varied birdlife. Above all the SOC is a club, relying heavily on keen volunteers and the support of its membership.

Headquarters provide central publications and an annual conference, and houses the Waterston Library, the most comprehensive library of bird literature in Scotland. The network of branches, which meet in Aberdeen, Ayr, the Borders, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, New Galloway, Orkney, St Andrews, Stirling, Stranraer and Thurso, organise field meetings, a winter programme of talks and social events.

The SOC also supports the Local Recorders' Network and the Scottish Birds Records Committee. The latter maintains the 'official' Scottish List on behalf of the Club. The Club supports research and survey work through its Research Grants.

The Club maintains a regularly-updated web site, which not only contains much information about the Club, but is also the key source of information about birds and birdwatching in Scotland.

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